



## NBII All-Nodes Meeting

### Keynote Address



*Jeff Hagener  
Director  
Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks*

*Big Sky Resort and Conference Center  
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I want to thank Dick (Jachowski) and Dennis (Carlson) for their introduction to this great state and this conference. I welcome you as well to Big Sky Country. Senator Burns has been extremely helpful with projects such as this for our state. He sits as the Chairman of the Subcommittee for Interior Appropriations. That's been very important for several things we've done in Montana, particularly regarding fish and wildlife species. We're very appreciative of the assistance he's given us.

I want to give you a little more background about this great state. This conference is in a beautiful Montana location. Year-round, southwest Montana is a destination for hundreds of thousands of visitors. But this state

is greater than just this area, of course. You're only seeing a small part of the diversity this state has to offer. That's what's extremely important to me in my job and for my staff of natural resource managers in this state.

Montana stretches for over 600 miles east to west, and over 400 miles north to south. We sit at the headwaters of two major river systems: the Missouri River flows out from our east side and flows on down into the Mississippi and eventually the Gulf of Mexico. With the drought conditions we have throughout the West and Midwest, there's a tremendous interest in water. We, along with North and South Dakota, have some major reservoirs in the upstream end. We look at those reservoirs as major recreation sources and for others who utilize that water. There's been

have bull trout that are a threatened species, as well as westslope cutthroat, that are very dependent on water levels maintained in the western parts of the state. Again, we have large reservoirs that drain into the system. But as we move further downstream, those of you from the West Coast know that salmon is the big issue. So we feel we get on the short side of things because salmon seems to become more important than the bull trout. They want the water from Montana to come and help with the salmon spawning runs; but by taking that water, we're jeopardizing our recovering bull trout and making it more difficult for westslope cutthroat. So water issues are a major issue in our state. Right now we have about an 8-year sustained drought making the situation worse.

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a continual fight for several years about the release of that water to go on downstream to the downriver states. A lot has to do with industries down there, specifically barge traffic. Our interest has to do with recreation and native fishes and so forth.

On the west side of the state, we have the headwaters of the Clark Fork drainage, which flows on into the Columbia and on to the Pacific. On that side, it's a similar issue. We have the headwaters again in our state. We

Our habitats throughout the state vary from short grass prairies to sagebrush steppe on the eastern part of the state. We have a tremendous amount of that, as well as riparian wooded bottomlands through that area, but with a lot of open spaces with great expanses of native prairie species. Going to the western part of the state, where it's heavily timbered, and even glacial and arctic type tundra. The very highest levels are in Glacier National Park. We have a tremendous amount of variety in between.



*Swan*

Our annual precipitation also varies dramatically. In an area south of Billings it's about 4 inches per year, to somewhere around 45-50 inches per year in the northwestern part of the state. So you have a tremendous amount of variety throughout the state depending on elevation, snow levels, and so forth.

We talk a lot about what's normal in the state, but everything for the last 8 years has been well away from "normal." But what is "normal"? What effect does climate change have on habitat, species, and natural resources? The NBII deals with that kind of thing, too.

As far as wildlife species, again, we have a tremendous variety. In Montana and other states, the emphasis for many years has been on the game species. Sportsmen are very passionate about their opportunity to pursue those species. They want to have those species available for hunting and fishing. So over the years a lot of the other species were overlooked.

Over the last ten years, several of the programs – especially the States Wildlife Grants (SWG) program – have helped us broaden the focus on the whole cadre of species, everything that's out there. A lot of those species have benefited from the management of the game species. But we had species we didn't know anything about and weren't really considered as part of the mix.

We have species of special interest here in the Yellowstone Ecosystem and on into the Northern Continental Divide. We have two of the largest land carnivores out there – wolves and grizzly bears, which we believe are very healthy

migratory bird that migrates through North America -- from swans (the largest) to hummingbirds (the smallest). They all fly through here and some nest here. We have a wide variety of grouse. We have many songbirds that come from great distances.

On the fish side of it, we have many blue ribbon trout streams, and I hope some of you get a chance to enjoy these. We have many fish on the east side that are warm water native species. In some cases we have stocked species (walleye). But we have to understand the dynamics of the ecosystems we put those kinds of fish into. We're in the process now of trying to eliminate some species that were stocked by my agency as much as a 100 years ago that were found to be a detriment to the native species. Some of that is controversial because in some cases people have come to like the species that are there now.

We have some major large fish species. We have paddlefish in the Missouri and Yellowstone river drainages that can go up to 140 pounds. We have pallid sturgeon that are in the threatened status,

populations. We're working on the recovery of those species and, hopefully, de-listing so that they can go under full state management.

On the other end of it, we have the smallest of the voles and mice here. We have a variety of bats. We have nearly every

and they may be moved to endangered in the near future, with perhaps as few as 20 mature adults still surviving. A lot of that has to do with dams and diversions along the river systems. Salmon, for instance, often can navigate such obstructions. But not warm water species that don't swim that fast or aren't nearly as agile. How can we get them around such barriers? This is something we're looking at.

We're extremely proud of all of our natural resources, but we can't manage those resources by ourselves. We're heavily dependent on partnerships with other state and federal agencies, with university systems, with private landowners, conservation groups, and the public. About 35 percent of the land in Montana is federal or state government owned. Part of that includes places like Glacier National Park and Yellowstone National Park as well as a tremendous amount of BLM and Forest Service land. About 7 percent is in tribal reservations. We're trying to work closely with them, too. As we all know, our fish and wildlife don't know anything about boundaries, so we need to work in partnerships.



*Glacier National Park*



One of our partnerships is with the Big Sky Institute and with the NBII Northern Rockies Information Node, particularly in the Yellowstone ecosystem. We have one person from our Bozeman office on the Big Sky Institute Steering Committee. We've collaborated on educational activities with Big Sky to try to educate the public. One of the things we think is critical to managing the species in this state for the long term is getting the public involved and knowledgeable. A lot of the comments we get come from out of state. We in Montana are required under the Montana Environmental Policy Act to go out for public comment on anything we do that can have an impact on the environment. We regularly get comments from around the world on such things as wolves and bison and many other species. People have a great interest in this state and particularly the Yellowstone ecosystem.

We're also involved with the planning and development for facilities. Part of that is with the Big Sky Institute. When you

go to Yellowstone, you'll notice the Porcupine Creek Wildlife Management Area that's just across the highway as you turn onto the highway when you leave Big Sky. That's a wildlife management area that was purchased many years ago for a winter range for elk that come from Yellowstone, as well as several other species in the area. We're looking at it in cooperation with Big Sky Institute in terms of many of the things they're doing with education.

Another partnership is with the USGS Rocky Mountain Science Center. It involves such things as grizzly bear monitoring. Grizzlies are currently listed as threatened throughout the state of Montana. One of the critical factors involved in de-listing grizzly bears is being able to document the number of animals that we have. Currently in the Yellowstone ecosystem the documentation has been very good

because the research has been there for a greater length of time. When we move out of that area the challenge becomes greater. We have anecdotal evidence that grizzlies are in greater numbers in the broader Montana area than ever before. When bears are getting in trouble, we track and move them back into the wilderness ecosystems. But we need good documented numbers.

We're currently in the process of implementing a DNA study, which began several years ago in Glacier National Park. We were successful, with the assistance of funding from Senator Burns, to go with the USGS and Kate Kendall to expand that study to the whole Northern Continental Divide ecosystem. We have 180 people in the field putting out wire snares to attract bears to those areas so

elk they believe. But we're all trying to work together to deal with the brucellosis issue.

We're also involved in studies of grazing by livestock on vegetation on Fish, Wildlife & Parks land in particular. We also have to manage in conjunction with the private landowners around us. If we don't do that, we end up with major problems with game depredation. We don't want livestock owners to be losing a lot of vegetation because of elk or deer or whatever species are there. We're trying to work cooperatively to manage that.

Another area of interest is Chronic Wasting Disease. Montana has been lucky. We've only had one case, and that being in a commercial game farm. We set up surveillance around that site and we haven't had any evidence of it showing up outside that site. But in areas above our northern borders (Alberta and Saskatchewan), and in South Dakota and Wyoming, there have been cases in which wild ungulates have been found with it. We know of species in the northeastern part of our state that migrate 50-60 miles into



Photo credit: Chris Servheen/USFWS

*Grizzly Bear*

we can get an idea of numbers of bears in those ecosystems. It's a major project that's going to require several years of accumulation of data, moving toward de-listing them and managing them as a normal species.

A second effort with USGS and the Northern Rocky Mountain Center is participation in the Greater Yellowstone Area brucellosis committee. A lot of the interest in bison in this area revolves around brucellosis. About 50 percent of the bison in Yellowstone are infected with it. There's a major concern with the livestock industries throughout the border states – Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. All of those states did have brucellosis free status. Wyoming has had some problems lately, related to



Photo credit: Ron Sepic

*Bison*

Saskatchewan. So it's critical for us to keep track of what's going on. We're developing a Chronic Wasting Disease plan, in case it comes here. It's a very significant issue we need to look at.

I've also been exposed to the NBII through the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (IAFWA). I currently chair IAFWA's Science and Research Committee. We've had presentations and liaisons there with the NBII in the past, most recently in Spokane at the 2004 North American

Fish and Wildlife Conference. Sally Benjamin, who was at that time the NBII-IAFWA liaison, talked about who the NBII was and how the states can make use of that. Currently the International has proposed \$6 million in grants for data management. We also have collaborative efforts between the International, NBII, and NatureServe to produce and manage the data that's out there. Within the Science and Research Committee, we've signed an agreement with the USGS that specifically is to fund the science and research liaison position and to develop workshops of priority science and research issues to be identified. The International just recently hired Russ Mason, currently with USDA-APHIS in Fort Collins, to be a staff liaison and do a lot of the coordination of issues with the NBII and others regarding state priorities in fish and wildlife management issues.

Through that IAFWA Science and Research Committee, we're establishing a process to work through the committee structure to identify priority research and science information needs of the membership and to share that information with federal partners to help guide future research and technical transfer efforts. I think we've all seen duplicative efforts going on. We haven't done a good job in sharing a lot of the information that's out there. So we're trying to centralize that information, put together workshops, and work with the NBII and NatureServe to put that information in a data source that's available for people to use in managing natural resources. The new NBII-IAFWA liaison will help coordinate with Russ Mason, with all the states, and with the Science and Research Committee.

There are several actions that we and other states are taking with the NBII that can help move these things forward. First we want to identify issues and priorities. And we want to have an ongoing dialogue with the NBII. We want to participate in NBII action planning through the regional forums in 2004 and 2005. I don't think a lot of the states yet recognize the value of the NBII to them. States are always looking for more data resources.

Several collaborative projects are currently underway between state agencies and the NBII that include assistance with tools, partnering, staffing, and standards:

- Sage Grouse Data Management Project – Sage grouse are very significant in Montana and a good part of the West. A technician that's directly funded by the NBII and International is playing an important role here. We see that as a critical component since the USFWS is currently considering petitions to list sage grouse through the West. A big part of this will depend on this technician's putting together relevant information
- Data Management Summit – Will be jointly hosted by the OFWIM, NBII, and IAFWA.

- We're also working together to put together regional Migratory Bird Atlases.
- CWD data standards development will play an important role in dealing with the disease, which I mentioned earlier.
- Metadata training and assistance with state data sets and projects.

The state side of it sees the NBII to be of use to us and other state agencies where it can be developed to provide access to regional biological information; partner on data management; help in the development and sharing of metadata; provide access to tools, techniques, and associated experience; and leverage resources to meet state needs. In particular, the Northern Rockies Information Node can assist the Montana Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Planning efforts by contributing to what we're doing in our overall Natural Heritage Program, data sets, and so forth.

I was a little naïve when I came into this position in not realizing how cherished these resources are. It goes far beyond sportsmen. Many folks from all backgrounds are passionate about these wild things.

The NBII is the tool that can bring together all of the information from federal entities, states, universities, NGO's, and others to help us manage lands and resources, not just in Montana, but throughout the nation.

Thanks for giving me the opportunity to speak to you this morning. I hope you have a great conference and will come back to Montana often!

### For More Information

Kate Kase  
U.S. Geological Survey  
Biological Informatics Office  
12201 Sunrise Valley Drive, MS 302  
Reston, VA 20192  
Phone: 703-648-4216  
Fax: 703-648-4042  
E-mail: [kate\\_kase@usgs.gov](mailto:kate_kase@usgs.gov)



Photo credit: Ron Sepic

*Old Faithful, Yellowstone National Park*